

# Road trip along the Canning Stock Route

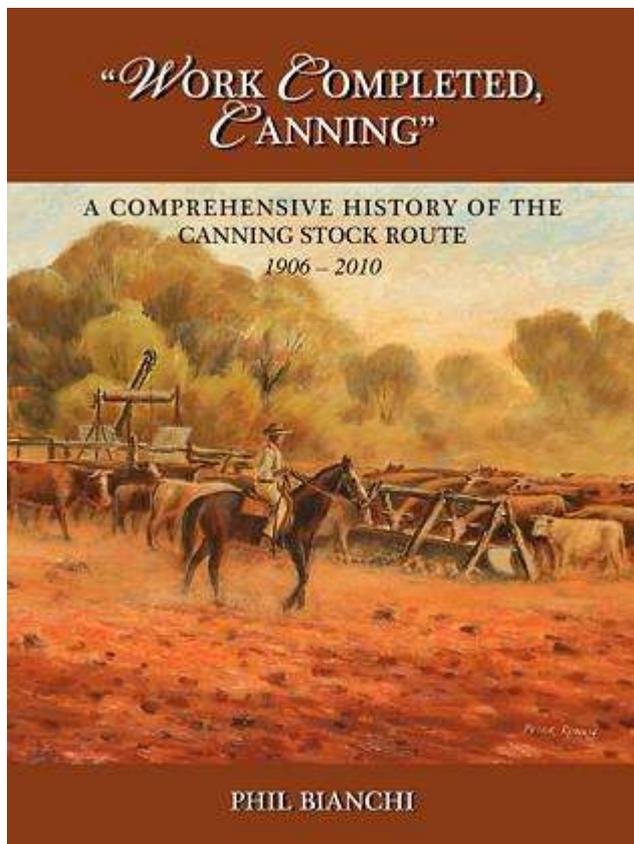
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Canning Stock Route Country, by Papunya Tula Artists *Source: Supplied*



The Alfred Canning survey party en route in Western Australia, c. 1901 *Source: Supplied*



Work Completed, Canning, by Phil Bianchi. *Source:* Supplied

**IT was the North's boldest dream; it was a frontier fantasy. It changed the maps; it destroyed a world. It was both a triumph of endurance and a fiasco of overreach. It opened up the last, lost quarter of the inland, it failed in its aims, it faded away.**

All these contradictory-seeming things are true, in some degree, of that exiguous, undulating 1850km strip of fine red sand, the Canning Stock Route, conceived more than a century ago as a lifeline to link the tropics and southwest, unused for long decades, eroded, overgrown, only to be abruptly revived and resuscitated in recent years, and much travelled as the focus of a fervent four-wheel drive cult.

What, then, is the great stock route of the desert now: a memory road or a piece of living heritage? Who shapes its stories? And what of its landscape, at once beautiful and disquieting, western and Aboriginal, stereotypically familiar and barely explored or known in depth?

At long last the Canning has its keen-eyed Herodotus, in the form of the all-chronicling Phil Bianchi, an adventurer and a local historian, a "master of the complexities of navigation", a constant desert traveller who has made the description of Australia's remotest outback track his life's chief task.

Bianchi's vast and richly illustrated *Work Completed, Canning* is more than just "a comprehensive history" and record of the route's initial construction and gradual deconstruction in the course of the century just past. It traces the ideas and hopes surrounding the project, it brings to life the scheme's architects, and gives brief portraits of the drovers who led their mobs of cattle down the sand-dune track.

In its scale, encyclopedic coverage and near-obsessive attention to detail, it is an enterprise quite in harmony with the grand ambitions of the "CSR" \_ there is a dedicated sub-chapter

listing the state of preservation of the route's many blazed trees, a report on present well conditions, even a full appendix on the Great Sandy Desert's various species of poison bush.

Above all, *Work Completed* serves to situate the CSR project at a crucial hinge point in time, and in the settlement of remote Australia. The stock route was the last trailblazing scheme of the far northwest, designed to close the frontier, to domesticate and adapt the inland wilderness. The track was surveyed and completed before World War I: the last cattle went down barely a decade after the end of World War II. It was a transition period. Modernity was dawning in Australia, technology was putting an end to the long isolation of the bush. This is a hard time to get right: to describe in the round, and hold in fair judgment in the mind.

When surveyor Alfred Canning rode out on camelback through Cue and Day Dawn in May 1906, the deserts were still realms of danger, where white men penetrated with a prayer on their lips, well aware their lives were in the balance. Water for the stock route wells was the initial expedition's chief goal, and in "that heartbreaking country" it was best found with the help of bush Aboriginal informants and guides: figures met with on the way, who proved, in Canning's words, "extremely useful to us throughout, showing us their native wells freely and thus probably saving us months of searching".

Exploration in the last reach of the hard backland: it was a heroic venture in the old style but one mounted at the outset of the new age of mass communication and intensifying public scrutiny. On return from his successful first probe, Canning's disaffected camp cook, Edward Blake, accused the expedition of maltreating desert Aborigines. There was a media storm. A Royal Commission ensued, as a result of which we know a good deal about Canning's methods. He constrained some of his guides in neck chains to prevent them absconding \_ but he did so only in accordance with procedures approved by the Wiluna police station. He built his wells deliberately near Aboriginal soaks, but he modified them with the aim of ensuring a continuous water source for all.

Canning's entry into that landscape launched the contact phase in the far western desert: wary engagement, enticed or coerced co-operation. The commission's findings were handed down within a month. Canning and the members of his team were exonerated, to the disgust of the newspapers and the relief of the Perth establishment: the main stock route construction party was promptly sent out, and the chain of wells sunk, 51 of them, over the course of two years in desert country, at a total cost of 22,000 pounds. "Work Completed" read the famous telegram Canning sent from Wiluna to the Mines Department in March 1910.

In truth it was only just beginning. The first drovers were heading south from Billiluna station on the fringes of the East Kimberley almost as soon as the last well was opened up. They were a tough breed, and a fair few of them were yarn-spinners and embellishers. Indeed at times in Bianchi's narrative it seem as though the track was not so much a stock route as a space for tall tales. And stories mattered on the track, almost as much as skill and a gift for command. There was more to droving on the CSR than escorting mobs of cattle hundreds strong through sand dune wasteland for months at a stretch. You needed to be capable in company.

Bush poets such as Mal Brown were popular, as was the disciplined George Lanagan, who was up and down the track for 20 years, and once even brought his wife Eileen along. You needed to be resilient, as well, and have a stomach of cast iron. The food was almost always damper and salt beef, three times a day. "You got used to it," remembers drover John Bee, who worked the stock route in his early adulthood.

The track stayed in use until 1959, when the last cattle from the north went down, accompanied by David Robson, one of the rare drover diarists. Even in those days, five decades after its wells were built, the passage was still rough, and led through forbidding landscape. It was winter in the desert when the team set out, as Robson recorded.

*The weather was fine, the nights very cold. I remember shaking the ice off the ground sheet before rolling it up in the morning and some nights the condensation inside also froze. On some mornings it was necessary to warm at a fire before relieving the body functions, as it felt like passing frozen motions. The water sometimes so brackish it caused what we called the scalds and urinating was like passing barb wire.*

Rations became a challenge as the trip wore on: “If the meat was blown we removed the maggots or cooked them, and if the meat edge was green we trimmed it \_ there were no complaints.”

More than 40 such cattlemen feature in Bianchi’s compendium, but the undisputed king of them all was the “barefoot drover”, Wally Dowling, self-appointed “Desert Rat number 1”, a master horseman and raconteur who gave his permanent address as “the land of long leads and short feeds”. He lived hard, died before his 50th year and is buried in a bush grave on Mistake Creek: it is decorated with plastic flowers to this day.

Dowling had rugged looks, and sad eyes, and a very rugged frame. On one of his journeys down the track, near Well 14, he was riding his favourite mount, Sandy, when they hit a thick desert oak at gallop. His leg was broken in two places. His men killed a bullock for meat, then wrapped the green hide round the fracture as a splint: as the raw hide hardened it formed a bush plaster. Dowling completed the trip on his riding camel, Jackie. The leg healed, “not straight, but near enough”. A wild story: a high-octane character, like a fair selection of those who crowded up and down the stock route in its heyday and its more multiplicit afterlife.

And all this would seem like mere bush derring-do, were it not for the recent shifts in metropolitan approaches to the outback and the frontier past. As things now stand, though, Bianchi is writing a counter-history, and the Canning Stock Route country is known today more for its Aboriginal art than the exploits of the old drovers. This is in great part the result of an extraordinary exhibition, mounted by the National Museum of Australia in Canberra in 2010 and toured nationally, *Yiwarra Kuju*.

The paintings on display were the result of a staged trip down the stock route, mounted by curators and art centre managers, with a flotilla of old desert artists in their troop-carriers. It was a protracted “back to country” mission: the artists made a set of canvases at painting camps along the track, and the testimony they provided when interviewed about the pastoral frontier and the coming of the stockmen shaped the show. The works they produced were bright-coloured; the version of the past presented as well. The stock route was “a long scar” on the landscape, the methods used to build it “cast an unmistakable shadow over its operation”, the art project had at last “recovered the indigenous history of the region”.

The most disturbing features of *Yiwarra Kuju* and its associated publications were the undocumented tales of white violence it set out. Several of the artists reported episodes of poisoning or murder. Spider Snell of Fitzroy Crossing’s Mangkaja Arts claimed to have been unknowingly fed the salted flesh of one of his close relations by a lone stockman on the track. Most spectacularly, the famous Balgo painter Eubena Nampitjin, who died last year, claimed in an ABC radio interview that she had been sexually exploited by the barefoot drover himself, the violent, whip-wielding Wally Dowling, and had borne him two children while travelling up and down the stock route. Bianchi has investigated this story with zeal, and can find nothing in the way of corroborating testimony or evidence.

The handful of clashes and killings on the old track are, in fact, well detailed, and were the focus of close police investigation in their time. Must these two different visions and versions of history be in such spectacularly irreconcilable conflict?

In fact, taken together, sifted, weighed with care, placed side by side, *Work Completed, Canning* and the various effusions of the Canning Stock Route art project allow a more intriguing picture of the past to shimmer into view, one in which the droving track from Halls Creek to Wiluna was not the product of a straightforward territorial occupation so much as the fruit of a negotiated economic intermingling. Far from being a wound or cut into the landscape, it can be seen as the mark of an informal truce or accommodation between very different peoples, given shape and presence on the ground. It was annexation, and also counter-claim, in a realm that still remains strikingly fluid, both in the active codes of law that govern it and in the encounters of those who move through it day by day.

The first drover down the Canning was an Aboriginal man, and the key manpower for the great cattle journeys of the stock route's golden times were Walmajarri and Wangkatjungka men born in the Sandy Desert country. In a certain fashion, the stock route was theirs as much as it was an umbilical for the station proprietors of Billiluna, Sturt Creek and Gordon Downs. Here again is David Robson, reflecting on his experiences half a century ago:

At no time in the Wiluna-Kimberley cattle country and the Northern Territory during 1954-1960 were the words racist/racism used, it was not part of our lives. We worked together, faced great danger and protected each other yet at the same time we did not live or camp together. The stories inside the stories remain in the memory. I am glad that I was part of it.

But this fusion or braiding of experiences that was so much a part of the far frontier in the transition between colonial and modern days now seems out of reach, indeed almost beyond imagining. Step by step, in museum presentations and in richly funded institutional publications, in myriad ways, history is being redrafted, repointed to emphasise the features of division and conflict in the fine-grained record of the frontier during Australia's foundation years. As a result, the Canning is increasingly a symbol of a divide within Australia itself. For there are two stock routes now \_ mental stock routes \_ and they will not be easily joined back together.

One of these is the stock route seen and described by FORM, the state grant-supported agency behind the NMA's *Yiwarra Kuju* exhibition, which has produced a smartphone App for travellers down the Canning, detailing its indigenous landscape and the episodes of clash and conflict along the journey, well by well. One is the Canning seen by everyday 4WD adventurers who regard the journey from Wiluna northwest with its 900 sand-dune crossings as a highlight in their lives, and view the country as the greatest treasure of the Australian desert outback.

These two tendencies in our culture share the same geography, but little else. One road, two worlds.

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## **Work Completed, Canning: A Comprehensive History of the Canning Stock Route 1906-2010**

By Phil Bianchi

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